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Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities

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IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT SOVIET MILITARY-POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS, EXCEPT AS NOTED IN THE TEXT.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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KEY JUDGMENTS

During the past several months, a number of coincident Soviet activities have created concern that they reflect abnormal Soviet fear of conflict with the United States, belligerent intent that might risk conflict, or some other underlying Soviet purpose. These activities have included large-scale military exercises (among them a major naval exercise in the Norwegian Sea, unprecedented SS-20 launch activity, and large-scale SSBN dispersal); preparations for air operations against Afghanistan; attempts to change the air corridor regime in Berlin; new military measures termed responsive to NATO INF deployments; and shrill propaganda attributing a heightened danger of war to US behavior.

Examining these developments in terms of several hypotheses, we reach the following conclusions:

— We believe strongly that Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States. This judgment is based on the absence of forcewide combat readiness or other war preparation moves in the USSR, and the absence of a tone of fear or belligerence in Soviet diplomatic communications, although the latter remain uncompromising on many issues. There have also been instances where the Soviets appear to have avoided belligerent propaganda or actions. Recent Soviet "war scare" propaganda, of declining intensity over the period examined, is aimed primarily at discrediting US policies and mobilizing "peace" pressures among various audiences abroad. This war scare propaganda has reverberated in Soviet security bureaucracies and emanated through other channels such as human sources. We do not believe it reflects authentic leadership fears of imminent conflict.

— We do not believe that Soviet war talk and other actions "mask" Soviet preparations for an imminent move toward confrontation on the part of the USSR, although they have an incentive to take initiatives that discredit US policies even at some risk. Were the Soviets preparing an initiative they believed carried a real risk of military confrontation with the United States, we would see preparatory signs which the Soviets could not mask.

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— The Soviet actions examined are influenced to some extent by Soviet perceptions of a mounting challenge from US foreign and defense policy. However, these activities do not all fit into an integrated pattern of current Soviet foreign policy tactics.

— Each Soviet action has its own military or political purpose sufficient to explain it. Soviet military exercises are designed to meet long-term requirements for force development and training which have become ever more complex with the growth of Soviet military capabilities.

— In specific cases, Soviet military exercises are probably intended to have the ancillary effect of signaling Soviet power and resolve to some audience. For instance, maneuvers in the Tonkin Gulf were aimed at backing Vietnam against China; Soviet airpower use in Afghanistan could have been partly aimed at intimidating Pakistan; and Soviet action on Berlin has the effect of reminding the West of its vulnerable access, but very low-key Soviet handling has muted this effect.

Taken in their totality, Soviet talk about the increased likelihood of nuclear war and Soviet military actions do suggest a political intention of speaking with a louder voice and showing firmness through a controlled display of military muscle. The apprehensive outlook we believe the Soviet leadership has toward the longer term US arms buildup could in the future increase its willingness to consider actions—even at some heightened risk—that recapture the initiative and neutralize the challenge posed by the United States.

These judgments are tempered by some uncertainty as to current Soviet leadership perceptions of the United States, by continued uncertainty about Politburo decisionmaking processes, and by our inability at this point to conduct a detailed examination of how the Soviets might have assessed recent US/NATO military exercises and reconnaissance operations. Notwithstanding these uncertainties, however, we are confident that, as of now, the Soviets see not an imminent military clash but a costly and—to some extent—more perilous strategic and political struggle over the rest of the decade.

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DISCUSSION

Introduction

1. There has been much Soviet talk about the increased danger of nuclear war. This theme has appeared in public pronouncements by Soviet political and military leaders, in statements by high officials targeted at both domestic and foreign audiences, in internal communications, and in other channels. Soviet authorities have declared that Washington is preparing for war, and have issued dire warnings that the USSR will not give in to nuclear blackmail or other military pressure. The articulation of this theme has paralleled the Soviet campaign to derail US INF deployment. It continues to this day, although at a somewhat lower intensity in recent months than in late 1983.

2. Since November 1983 there has been a high level of Soviet military activity, with new deployments of weapons and strike forces, large-scale military exercises, and several other noteworthy events:

— *INF response:* Start of construction of additional SS-20 bases following Andropov's announcement on 24 November 1983 of termination of the 20-month moratorium on SS-20 deployments opposite NATO; initiation [redacted] of patrols by E-II nuclear-powered cruise missile submarines off the US coast; [redacted] forward deployment [redacted] of long-range missile-carrying D-class SSBNs; and the start of deployment [redacted] of 925-km range SS-12/22 missiles in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, and continued propaganda and active measures against INF deployment.

— *Response to NATO exercise:* Assumption by Soviet air units in Germany and Poland [redacted] of high alert status with readying of nuclear strike forces as NATO conducted "Able Archer-83," a nuclear release command post exercise.

— *Soviet exercises:* Large-scale exercise activity during spring 1984 [redacted] featuring the multiple launches of SS-20s and SLBMs; survivability training including the dispersal of [redacted] operational Northern Fleet SSBNs supported by a large number of ships [redacted]

— *Berlin air corridors:* Periodic Soviet imposition beginning 20 February 1984 of minimum flight altitudes for the entire length of one or more of the Berlin air corridors—a unilateral change in the rules governing air access to Berlin.

— *Afghanistan:* Deployment in mid-April of several airborne units to Afghanistan, launching of a major spring offensive into the Panjsher Valley, and initiation on 21 April for the first time of high-intensity bombing of Afghanistan by over 105 TU-16 and SU-24 bombers based in the USSR.

— *East Asia:* Deployment in mid-November 1983 of naval TU-16 strike aircraft to Vietnam for the first time; positioning of both Soviet operational aircraft carriers for the first time simultaneously in Asian waters in March 1984; and the first joint Soviet/Vietnamese amphibious assault exercises on the coast of Vietnam in April.

— *Caribbean:* A small combined Soviet/Cuban naval exercise in the Gulf of Mexico, with the first-ever visit of a Soviet helicopter carrier in April/May, and Soviet/Cuban antisubmarine drills.

— *Troop rotation:* Initiation of the airlift portion of Soviet troop rotation in Eastern Europe 10 days later in April than this has occurred for the past five years.

This Estimate explores whether the Soviet talk about the increasing likelihood of nuclear war and the Soviet military activities listed above constitute a pattern of behavior intended either to alarm or intimidate the United States and its allies or to achieve other goals.

Possible Explanations

3. Specifically, in examining the facts we address five explanatory hypotheses:

a. Both the Soviet talk about war and the military activities have been consciously orchestrated

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across the board to achieve political effects through posturing and propaganda. The object has been to discredit US defense and foreign policies; to put Washington on notice that the USSR will pursue a hard—perhaps even dangerous—line, unless US concessions are forthcoming; to maintain an atmosphere of tension conducive to pressure by "peace" groups on Western governments; and, if possible, to undercut President Reagan's reelection prospects.

b. Soviet behavior is a response to Washington's rhetoric, US military procurement and R&D goals, and US military exercises and reconnaissance activities near Soviet territory—which have excited Soviet concerns and caused Moscow to flex its own military responsiveness, signaling to Washington that it is prepared for any eventuality.

c. Moscow itself is preparing for threatening military action in the future requiring a degree of surprise. The real aim behind its recent actions is not to alarm, but to desensitize the United States to higher levels of Soviet military activity—thus masking intended future moves and reducing US warning time.

d. A weak General Secretary and political jockeying in the Soviet leadership have lessened policy control at the top and permitted a hardline faction, under abnormally high military influence, to pursue its own agenda, which—intentionally or not—looks more confrontational to the observer.

e. The Soviet military actions at issue are not linked with the talk about war and are basically unrelated events, each with its own rationale.

Soviet Talk About Nuclear War

4. Our assessment of the meaning of alarmist statements and propaganda about the danger of nuclear war provides a starting point for evaluating recent Soviet military activities.

5. Soviet talk about the war danger is unquestionably highly orchestrated. It has obvious external aims:

— To create a tense international climate that fosters "peace" activism in the West and public pressure on Western governments to backtrack on INF deployment, reduce commitments to NATO, and distance themselves from US foreign policy objectives.

— To elicit concessions in arms control negotiations by manipulating the anxieties of Western political leaders about Soviet thinking.

— To strengthen cohesion within the Warsaw Pact and reinforce Soviet pressure for higher military outlays by non-Soviet member states.

The overall propaganda campaign against the United States has recently been supplemented with the boycott of the Olympic Games.

6. The talk about the danger of nuclear war also has a clear domestic propaganda function: to rationalize demands on the Soviet labor force, continued consumer deprivation, and ideological vigilance in the society. This message is also being disseminated [redacted] within the Soviet and East European [redacted] bureaucracies, [redacted]

7. The central question remains: what are the real perceptions at top decisionmaking levels of the regime? Our information about such leadership perceptions is largely inferential. Nevertheless, we have confidence in several broad conclusions.

8. First, we believe that there *is* a serious concern with US defense and foreign policy trends. There is a large measure of agreement among both political and military leaders that the United States has undertaken a global offensive against Soviet interests. Central to this perception is the overall scope and momentum of the US military buildup. Fundamentally, the Soviets are concerned that US programs will undercut overall Soviet military strategy and force posture. Seen in this context, Moscow condemns INF deployment as a telling—but subordinate—element in a more far-reaching and comprehensive US effort aimed at "regaining military superiority." *The threat here is not immediate, but longer term.* However, the ability of the United States to carry out its longer term plans is questioned by Soviet leaders not only to reassure domestic audiences but also because they genuinely see some uncertainty in the ability of the United States to sustain its military effort.

9. Secondly, in our judgment *the nature of the concern is as much political as it is military.* There is a healthy respect for US technological prowess and anxiety that this could in due course be used against the USSR. The Soviets are thus concerned that the United States might pursue an arms competition that could over time strain the Soviet economy and disrupt the regime's ability to manage competing military and

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civilian requirements. More immediately, the Soviets are concerned that the United States could achieve a shift in the overall balance of military power which, through more interventionist foreign policies, could effectively thwart the extension of Soviet influence in world affairs and even roll back past Soviet gains. From this perspective, the United States' actions in Central America, Lebanon, Grenada, and southern Africa are seen as a token of what could be expected on a broader scale in the future.

10. Third, and most important for this assessment, we do not believe the Soviet leadership sees an imminent threat of war with the United States. It is conceivable that the stridency of Soviet "war scare" propaganda reflects a genuine Soviet worry about a near-future attack on them. This concern could be inspired by Soviet views about the depth of anti-Soviet intentions in Washington combined with elements of their own military doctrine projected onto the United States, such as the virtues of surprise, striking first, and masking hostile initiatives in exercises. Some political and military leaders have stressed the danger of war more forcefully than others, suggesting that there may have been differences on this score—or at least how to talk about the issue—over the past half year.

11. However, on the basis of what we believe to be very strong evidence, we judge that the Soviet leadership does not perceive an imminent danger of war. Our reasons are the following:

— The Soviets have not initiated the military readiness moves they would have made if they believed a US attack were imminent.

— In private US diplomatic exchanges with Moscow over the past six months the Soviets have neither made any direct threats connected with regional or other issues nor betrayed any fear of a US attack.

— Obligatory public assertions of the viability of the Soviet nuclear deterrent have been paralleled by private assertions within regime circles by Soviet experts that there is currently a stable nuclear balance in which the United States does not have sufficient strength for a first strike.

— In recent months top leaders, including the Minister of Defense and Politburo member Dmitriy Ustinov, have somewhat downplayed the nuclear war danger, noting that it should not be "overdramatized" (although Ustinov's recent Victory Day speech returned to a somewhat shriller tone). At the same time, high foreign affairs officials have challenged the thesis that the United States can unleash nuclear war and have emphasized constraints on such a course of action.

Moreover, the Soviets know that the United States is at present far from having accomplished all of its force buildup objectives.

Recent Soviet Military Activities

12. ***Intimidation?*** It is possible that some of the Soviet military activities listed above were intended, as ancillary to their military objectives, to intimidate selected audiences:

— The East Asian naval maneuvers, deployment of strike aircraft to Vietnam, and amphibious exercises have displayed military muscle to China.

— The bombing campaign in Afghanistan could be seen not only as an operation against the insurgency but also as an implicit threat to neighboring countries—Pakistan and perhaps Iran.

— In mounting large-scale and visible exercises (such as the March-April Northern and Baltic Fleet exercise in the Norwegian Sea) Moscow would understand that they could be perceived as threatening by NATO audiences.

13. Soviet INF-related military activities have also been designed to convey an impression to the West that the world *is* a more dangerous place following US INF deployment and that the USSR is making good on its predeployment threats to counter with deployments of its own.

14. There is uncertainty within the Intelligence Community on the origins of Soviet behavior with respect to the Berlin air corridors. It is possible that Soviet action was a deliberate reminder of Western vulnerability. Alternatively, airspace requirements for exercises may have motivated this move. The low-key manner in which the Soviets have handled the issue does not suggest that they have been interested in squeezing access to Berlin for intimidation purposes. Nevertheless, the Soviets have been in the process of unilaterally changing the corridor flight rules and thereby reminding the West of their ultimate power to control access to Berlin. After a short hiatus in late April and early May, the Soviets declared new air corridor restrictions, indicating that this effort contin-

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ues. In a possibly related, very recent development, the Soviets declared tight new restrictions on travel in East Germany by allied missions located in Potsdam.

15. In a number of instances we have observed the Soviets avoiding threatening behavior or propaganda when they might have acted otherwise, perhaps in some cases to avoid embarrassment or overcommitment. For example, they:

— Never publicly acknowledged the incident in November 1983 in which a Soviet attack submarine was disabled off the US coast as it attempted to evade a US ASW ship, and moved the sub quickly out of Cuba where it had come for emergency repairs.

—

— Took no tangible action in March when one of their merchant tankers hit a mine off Nicaragua.

— Notified Washington of multiple missile launches in early April as a gesture of "good will."

16. *Reaction to US actions?* The new Soviet deployments of nuclear-armed submarines off US coasts and the forward deployment of SS-12/22 missiles in Eastern Europe are a Soviet reaction to NATO INF deployment, which the Soviets claim is very threatening to them—although the threat perceived here by Moscow is certainly not one of imminent nuclear attack.

17. Soviet military exercises themselves sometimes embody a "reactive" element.

A key issue is whether this counterexercising takes on the character of actual preparation for response to a perceived threat of possible US attack.

18. A case in point is the Soviet reaction to "Able Archer-83." This was a NATO command post exercise held in November 1983 that was larger than previous "Able Archer" exercises

The elaborate Soviet reaction to this recent exercise included

the placing of Soviet air units in East Germany and Poland in heightened readiness

Alert measures included increasing the number of fighter-interceptors on strip alert,

Although the Soviet reaction was somewhat greater than usual, by confining heightened readiness to selected air units Moscow clearly revealed that it did not in fact think there was a possibility at this time of a NATO attack.

19. How the Soviets choose to respond to ongoing US military activities, such as exercises and reconnaissance operations, depends on how they assess their scope, the trends they may display, and above all the hostile intent that might be read into them. We are at present uncertain as to what novelty or possible military objectives the Soviets may have read into recent US and NATO exercises and reconnaissance operations because a detailed comparison of simultaneous "Red" and "Blue" actions has not been accomplished. The Soviets have, as in the past, ascribed the same threatening character to these activities as to US military buildup plans, that is, calling them preparations for war. But they have not charged a US intent to prepare for imminent war.

20. *Preparation for surprise military action?* There is one case in our set of military activities that might conceivably be ascribed to the "masking" of threatening Soviet initiatives. For the first time in five years, the airlift portion of the troop rotation in Eastern Europe began on 25 April rather than 15 April. This may have reflected a change in training and manning practices or the introduction of new airlift procedures. The change of timing of the airlift portion of the annual troop rotation could also be a step toward blurring a warning indicator—a comprehensive delay of annual Soviet troop rotations which would prevent degradation of the forces by withdrawing trained men. But the rail portion of the rotation began ahead of schedule and, in any event, the pattern of rotation was within broad historical norms.

21. In early April, when the Soviets began to assemble a bomber strike force in the Turkestan Military

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District, there was some concern that it might represent masking of preparations for operations against Pakistan, or even Iran, rather than against the most obvious target, Afghanistan. At this point the force is clearly occupied against Afghanistan. It was never suitably deployed for use against Iran. We believe that, although the force could be used against Pakistan, a major air offensive against Pakistan without forewarning or precursor political pressure would serve no Soviet purpose and is extremely unlikely.

22. [redacted]

[redacted]

23. *Policy impact of leadership weakness or factionalism?* The Soviet Union has had three General Secretaries in as many years and, given the age and frail health of Chernenko, yet another change can be expected in a few years. This uncertain political environment could be conducive to increased maneuvering within the leadership and magnification of policy disagreements. Some have argued that either the Soviet military or a hardline foreign policy faction led by Gromyko and Ustinov exerts more influence than it could were Chernenko a stronger figure. Although individual Soviet military leaders enjoy great authority in the regime and military priorities remain high for the whole leadership, we do not believe that the Soviet military, as an institution, is exerting unusually heavy influence on Soviet policy. Nor do we believe that any faction is exerting influence other than through Politburo consensus. Consequently we reject the hypothesis that weak central leadership accounts for the Soviet actions examined here.

24. *A comprehensive pattern?* In our view, the military activities under examination here do tend to have their own military rationales and the exercises are integrated by long-term Soviet force development plans. However, these activities do not all fit into an integrated pattern of current Soviet foreign policy tactics. The different leadtimes involved in initiating various activities argue against orchestration for a political purpose. A number of the activities represent routine training or simply refine previous exercises. In other cases, the activities respond to circumstances that could not have been predicted ahead of time.

Conclusions

25. Taken in their totality, Soviet talk about the increased likelihood of nuclear war and Soviet military actions do suggest a political intention of speaking with a louder voice and showing firmness through a controlled display of military muscle. At the same time, Moscow has given little sign of desiring to escalate tensions sharply or to provoke possible armed confrontation with the United States.

26. Soviet talk of nuclear war has been deliberately manipulated to rationalize military efforts with domestic audiences and to influence Western electorates and political elites. Some Soviet military activities have also been designed to have an alarming or intimidating effect on various audiences (notably INF "counterdeployments," the naval exercise in the Norwegian Sea, and naval and air activities in Asia).

27. Our assessment of both Soviet talk about nuclear war and Soviet military activities indicates a very low probability that the top Soviet leadership is seriously worried about the imminent outbreak of nuclear war, although it is quite possible that official propaganda and vigilance campaigning have generated an atmosphere of anxiety throughout the military and security apparatus. The available evidence suggests that none of the military activities discussed in this Estimate have been generated by a real fear of imminent US attack.

28. Although recent Soviet military exercises combine with other ongoing Soviet programs to heighten overall military capabilities, we believe it unlikely that they are intended to mask current or near-future preparations by the USSR for some directly hostile military initiative. Moreover, we are confident that the activities we have examined in this Estimate would

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not successfully mask all the extensive logistic and other military preparations the Soviets would have to commence well before a realistic offensive initiative against any major regional security target.

29. Both the talk of nuclear war and the military activities address the concerns of a longer time horizon. Moscow's inability to elicit major concessions in the arms talks, successful US INF deployment, and—most important by far—the long-term prospect of a buildup of US strategic and conventional military forces, have created serious concern in the Kremlin. We judge that the Soviet leadership does indeed believe that the United States is attempting to restore a military posture that severely undercuts the Soviet power position in the world.

30. The apprehensive outlook we believe the Soviet leadership has toward the longer term Western arms buildup could in the future increase its willingness to consider actions—even at some heightened risk—that recapture the initiative and neutralize the military challenge posed by the United States. Warning of such actions could be ambiguous.

31. Our judgments in this Estimate are subject to three main sources of uncertainty. We have inadequate information about:

a. The current mind-set of the Soviet political leadership, which has seen some of its optimistic international expectations from the Brezhnev era disappointed.

b. The ways in which military operations and foreign policy tactics may be influenced by political differences and the policy process in the Kremlin.

c. The Soviet reading of our own military operations, that is, current reconnaissance and exercises.

Notwithstanding these uncertainties, however, we are confident that, as of now, the Soviets see not an imminent military clash but a costly and—to some extent—more perilous strategic and political struggle over the rest of the decade.

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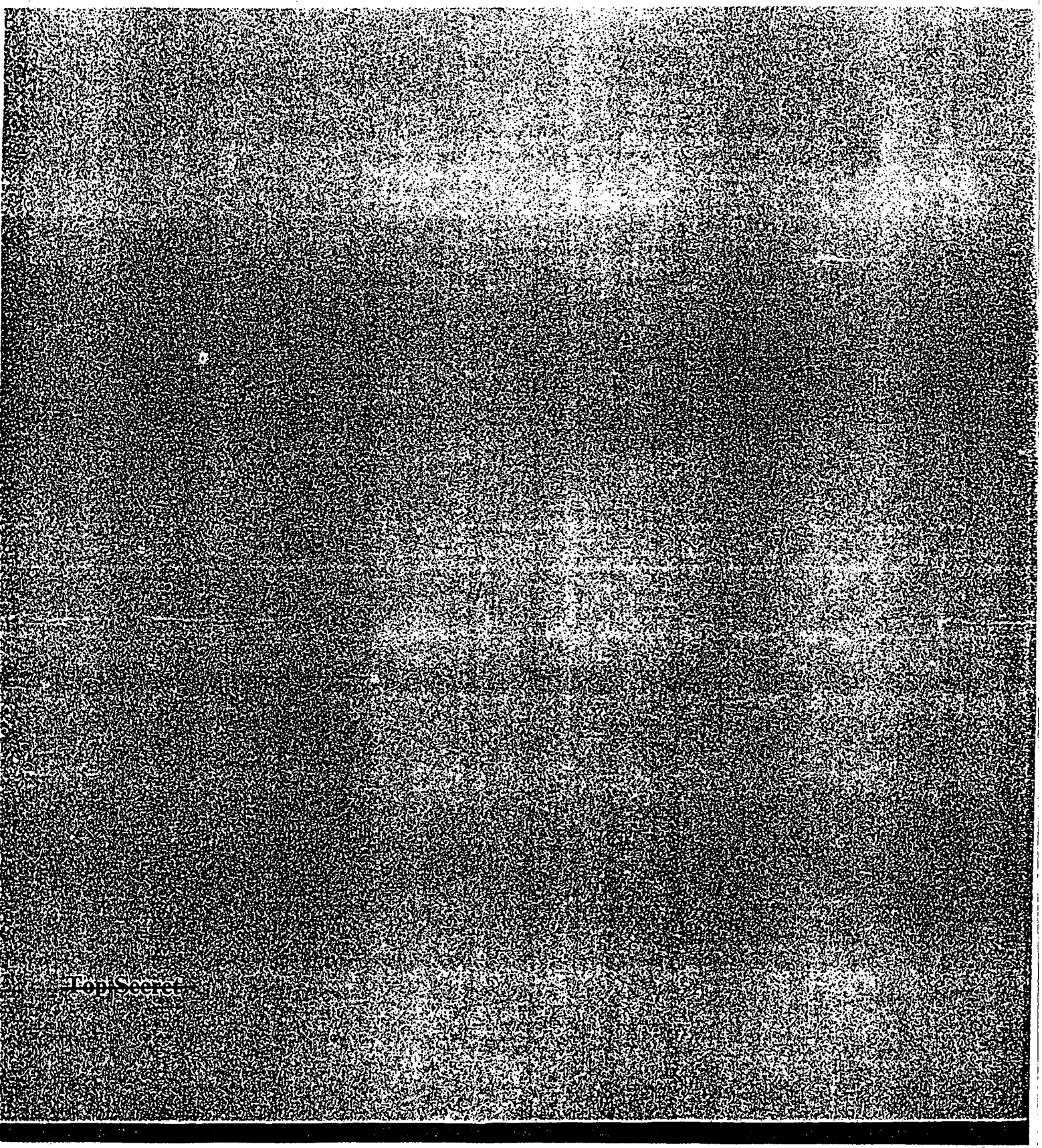

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